

Testimony of
The Honorable Ann M. Veneman,
Secretary of Agriculture

Before the Select Committee on Homeland Security
United States House of Representatives

July 16, 2002

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the President's proposal for a new Department of Homeland Security.

The President has put forth a bold and historic plan aimed at better protecting our nation from potential terrorist threats in the future. The President's approach is to bring together agencies currently with missions related to the protection of our homeland and merge them into a single agency that will better protect, better prepare and better coordinate this critical responsibility.

This requires extraordinary vision, new thinking and the ability to look at the much larger issue at hand – and that is again, the protection of our citizens against potential threats. And, I must say, we have appreciated the leadership role of this Committee and Members of both the House and the Senate for the strong role you have played in moving forward with this Legislation.

For the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the events of September 11 changed forever the context in which we do our work, as has been the case in so many other federal agencies.

In the past, the focus of most of our efforts has been to prevent and deter the unintentional introduction of pests and diseases from entering our country.

In February 2001, our systems were put to the test, when we saw the devastating impacts of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) in the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe. At the time, USDA initiated an aggressive strategy to prevent FMD from reaching our country by providing technical support to Great Britain, increasing staffing at ports of entry around the country by adding new border officers, detector dog teams, and port veterinarians. We worked closely with state agriculture departments to strengthen our coordination, training, and contingency plans, as well as launching public information campaigns to educate the public about their role in helping keep FMD out of the U.S.

Through the President's FY 2003 budget proposal and supplemental appropriations by the Congress, we continue those efforts today. Our border protection personnel levels will be at their highest levels ever, and investments in the areas of research, laboratory

upgrades, security, have enhanced our ability to prepare and respond to potential threats to American agriculture.

These much needed resources not only help protect against unintentional threats, but they are helping as we deal directly with the potential acts of terrorism that we now face in the wake of September 11th.

But the potential of *intentional* threats to agricultural production and our food supply have required us to do much more. We have been working closely with other federal agencies, state agriculture departments, academia and the agriculture sector, on many fronts to secure and strengthen planning and preparedness.

For example, we have expedited work with U.S. Customs Service to implement an automated inspection targeting system. We have collaborated with research universities and state agriculture departments to step up the development of rapid detection systems, expand our network of diagnostic laboratories, strengthen pest and disease surveillance, better secure and strengthen laboratories, and improve emergency preparedness capabilities.

While a great deal of work has been done in a very short amount of time, the job is far from over. We cannot let down our guard. When it comes to protecting U.S. agriculture and our food supply, we must continuously improve and strengthen our protection capabilities.

Governor Ridge and I enjoy a strong working relationship and I can tell you he understands clearly the importance of USDA's role in homeland security. In the months since he became the President's advisor on these issues, I have grown to appreciate his knowledge and understanding of the complex issues throughout federal government.

This is why the President proposed including USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)- the agency that prevents and manages outbreaks of pests and diseases- and the Plum Island Disease Facility in the new Department. In the past few weeks, the House Agriculture Committee has worked with Administration to refine the President's proposal. The result of that work appears in the Committee's amendment that moves the specialized border inspection and enforcement functions of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as well as the Plum Island Disease Facility, to the new Department. The Administration supports the amendment. We look forward to working with Congress so that the final bill provides the Secretary of Homeland Security the coordinating authorities required to ensure integrated plans to address the threat of agro-terrorism.

The House Agriculture Committee's amendment is consistent with the President's goal of unifying the border and transportation security functions of many Federal agencies. It affirms the critical role played by inspections of agricultural cargo, conveyances, and international passengers. It acknowledges the close partnerships USDA inspection personnel have developed with the U.S. Customs Service, the Immigration and

Naturalization Service, and the U.S. Border homeland security inspection personnel involved in examining cargo, passengers, and trade in food and agricultural products.

Finally, the amendment recognizes that the transfer of the Plum Island Animal Disease Center is integral to the Department of Homeland Security. In short, the transfer of APHIS' agricultural quarantine inspection program and the Plum Island Animal Disease Center to the Department of Homeland Security is the right step to take to protect our Nation's security and agricultural health.

Mr. Chairman, again, I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. I appreciate your leadership, and that of this Committee in addressing the important issues related to homeland security, particularly as it relates to the protection of agriculture and our food supply. I look forward to answering your questions today and a continued dialogue on these and other issues in the future.